Exploring the UN's Interventionist Role in South Sudan: Peacemaking, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding

Norman Sempijja

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Norman Sempijja

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Abstract

The role of the United Nations (UN) in conflict intervention in Africa has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a central actor to a more supportive role. Regional organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), have taken the lead in mediation and conflict resolution on the continent. While the UN continues to play a crucial part in peacekeeping and peacebuilding, its role is increasingly impacted by fragmented responsibilities, regional political dynamics, and operational constraints. In assessing how these factors have influenced the effectiveness of UN intervention, this study draws the case of South Sudan. Specifically, it examines whether the UN's peripheral role in peacemaking has directly impacted its ability to implement peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts, or whether broader structural and political challenges are more decisive in shaping its effectiveness. By analyzing the complex interactions between the UN, regional organizations, and the realities of the conflict in South Sudan, this study argues that the UN's limited role in peace negotiations is not the primary determinant of its success or failure. Instead, the combined effects of institutional fragmentation, competing regional interests, and the unstable political landscape of South Sudan have shaped the outcomes of UN interventions. These findings challenge the assumption that the UN's peripheral role inherently weakens its impact, demonstrating that its effectiveness depends on how well it navigates these broader structural challenges. This study contributes to the ongoing debates on the evolving nature of international peace operations in Africa and the need for better coordination between global and regional actors to achieve sustainable peace.

Keywords: United Nations, African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding, Peacemaking

Introduction

After two decades of civil war, South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011 and became the world's newest country. However, two years later, violence erupted in the country, causing the death of about 400,000 people and the displacement of 4 million people.[1]

The resumption of armed hostilities was due to an internal political rift between President Salva Kiir and Vice-President Riek Machar, which then became a protracted ethnic conflict, as each political faction's armed guard later split into various rebel armed groups. Adding a layer of complexity, pre-existing ethnic divisions within the new country's security forces led to the rapid fragmentation of the military on each side of the political dispute, which further escalated tensions and fed into the rapid spread of conflict.[2]

The Security Council established the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) on July 9, 2011, following the country's independence for an initial period of one year. It replaced the UN Mission to Sudan (UNMIS), established in 2005 after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between Sudan and South Sudan (Stamnes 2015). Resolution 1996 (2011) mandated UNMISS to consolidate peace and security, and it was primarily deployed to a state-building-focused mission as it was determined that the situation in South Sudan constituted a threat to international peace and regional security. The mission initially comprised 7,000 troops and 900 police officers.[3] The strategic objective of UNMISS was clear: capacity-building in peace consolidation to support the new South Sudanese government. However, because the mission focused on impeding aggression from the north, a possible rift within the SPLA itself was rarely considered. Following the outbreak of the South Sudanese civil war in December 2013 between the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) and the government, the UNMISS mandate shifted from a state-building focus to the Protection of Civilians (PoC) and, hence, peacekeeping.[4] The shift from peacebuilding to peacekeeping marked a significant departure from UNMISS's original mandate, as it moved from a state-building focus to prioritizing the Protection of Civilians, as reflected in the updated UNMISS mandate defined in Resolution 2155.[5]

The concepts of peacebuilding, peacekeeping, and peacemaking are three interconnected, yet distinct approaches to conflict resolution. According to the United Nations, each plays a unique role in promoting stability and preventing violence. Peacemaking focuses on resolving active conflicts through diplomatic efforts, negotiating agreements between opposing parties, and establishing a framework for peace. Once hostilities subside, peacebuilding comes into play as a long-term process aimed at preventing conflict recurrence. It works by addressing deep-rooted societal and state challenges, while strengthening the government's capacity to function effectively and legitimately. Meanwhile, peacekeeping serves as one of the UN's most effective tools for guiding countries through a fragile transition from conflict to peace. Built on legitimacy, burden sharing, and a multidimensional approach, peacekeeping integrates military, police, and civilian efforts to support stability. This process extends beyond maintaining security to include facilitating political processes, protecting civilians, supporting elections, and promoting human rights and the rule of law.[6]

Building on a foundational understanding of the United Nations' involvement in South Sudan, this study examines the interactions between UN entities and regional organizations. This analysis aims to highlight how these relationships influence the UN's operational effectiveness and strategic approaches to state-building and nation-building.

South Sudan's prolonged political and economic instability has tested the efficacy of cooperative frameworks between the UN and regional organizations. In this context, the roles of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) have been crucial, with IGAD leading mediation efforts between South Sudanese factions and the AU, providing broader support for the peace process. However, the extent to which these regional interventions have complemented or complicated UN efforts remains a critical area of analysis.

The primary aim of this study is to assess the UN's role in South Sudan and to examine how fragmented responsibilities, regional political dynamics, and operational limitations have impacted the effectiveness of its peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts. By shifting the focus from a narrow analysis of the UN's marginal role to a broader evaluation of interconnected factors, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the obstacles to achieving sustainable peace in the region. This approach determines whether the UN's intervention is constrained primarily by its limited role in peacemaking or by other structural and political challenges.

Literature review

The South Sudan Civil War, which erupted in 2013, is deeply rooted in the history of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which was divided between advocating for Sudan's democratic transformation and supporting secession.[7] Nyadera[8] focuses on ethnic animosities as a key factor in escalating political rivalries into violent ethnic disputes through mobilization and divisive rhetoric. Previous peace efforts have largely failed due to a lack of political goodwill from both the government and opposition, as leaders prioritize gaining power over genuine reconciliation.[9]

The inherent complexities of the South Sudan conflict have made peacebuilding a challenging process, explaining the difficulties faced by UNMISS and the obstacles hindering the UN's peacebuilding attempts. UNMISS operates as a large, multidimensional peacekeeping mission with significant resources and ambitious mandates.[10] It has played a crucial role in reducing violence in certain regions by increasing the presence of peacekeepers and mediating conflicts while also contributing to civilian protection, supporting peace agreements, and facilitating humanitarian aid delivery.[11] Despite these efforts, significant challenges persist, such as restricted access to remote conflict zones, resource limitations, and ongoing security threats.[12]

UNMISS has also faced direct armed confrontations with local groups, including the 2016 Juba Crisis, which led to attacks on UN bases and civilian shelters.[13] The UNMISS's formal role in the broader peace process remains limited, primarily providing logistical support rather than direct mediation. While local-level engagement appears to support peace efforts, the mission faces dilemmas such as balancing the security of PoC sites with the need for broader.[14] This peripheral role of the UNMISS reflects a broader trend of UN interventions in Africa. The UN has shifted from its initial role of deploying military personnel to separating conflicting groups and preventing violence to a more comprehensive approach that includes multinational efforts to create conditions for sustainable peace.[15] Peacekeeping remains a crucial element of conflict management and peacemaking, particularly in preventing conflict escalation and protecting civilian lives.[16]

While the UN has historically led peacekeeping efforts in Africa, the AU is increasingly assuming responsibility, driven by the principle of "African solutions for African problems." Peacekeeping aims to create stability for negotiations rather than directly achieving peace, forcing conflicting parties to reconsider their actions. For instance, IGAD has been actively involved in conflict resolution since 2013, leading to diplomatic negotiations and revitalization talks. However, the implementation of peace agreements, including the R-ARCSS, has faced both structural and systemic challenges.

The conflict in South Sudan remains a complex mix of ethnic, political, economic, and historical rivalries, necessitating a more comprehensive resolution strategy. IGAD's ability to mediate effectively is constrained by internal weaknesses, highlighting the need for institutional restructuring to enhance its conflict resolution capacity.[17] African institutions face significant obstacles, including financial constraints, non-payment of dues by member states, internal divisions, and difficulties integrating regional agreements into national policies. Additional challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure, political instability, and the influence of external economic policies, further hinder their effectiveness.[18] The nature of conflicts in Africa has also evolved, with intra-state conflicts—driven by political, religious, ethnic, and separatist tensions—now more prevalent than inter-state wars, exacerbated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.[19]

Given these challenges, African institutions often rely on external partnerships to enhance their capacity for conflict resolution and peacekeeping, despite the emphasis on African solutions to African problems. In this context, the UN-AU partnership has become crucial in addressing Africa's complex security landscape, combining the UN's resources and diplomatic leverage with the AU's regional expertise and engagement.

Both organizations bring different strengths to peacekeeping—the UN excels in strengthening peace processes and concluding agreements but struggles with coercive measures. In contrast, the AU is more willing to engage in counterterrorism operations but cannot implement peace agreements effectively. Cooperation between the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) is central to this partnership, yet their relationship remains unbalanced. While the AU has a better situational awareness of conflicts, the UNSC holds greater military and financial resources, leading to disparities in authority, political status, and decision-making power.[20]

Methodology

An exploratory research design was developed using a qualitative approach. Data was drawn from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included key resolutions and informant interviews. On the other hand, secondary data were drawn from existing literature, such as journal articles, reports, newspapers, and the internet. The study further relied on thematic analysis to tease out the key information related to the UN's peripheral role in peacemaking and its effect on peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we examine the relationship between the UN and regional organizations, such as the AU and IGAD, through the lens of the resource dependence theory and social constructivism. These theoretical frameworks help to explain how fragmented responsibilities, regional political dynamics, and operational limitations shape the effectiveness of the UN's peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan.

Resource Dependence Theory

Resource dependence theory provides a vital foundation for understanding the dynamics of inter-organizational cooperation in peacekeeping. As argued by Sempijja[21] and Brosig and Motsamai[22] the essence of this theory lies in the recognition that organizations often lack the complete array of resources required to achieve their objectives independently. This scarcity drives organizations to seek partners who can supply the necessary resources, leading to a relationship between resource exchange and subsequent interdependence.

In the context of the UN, AU, and IGAD, this theory sheds light on the rationale behind their cooperation. Each of these bodies brings unique capabilities and resources to the table that are crucial for the effective execution of peacekeeping missions.

For instance, the UN may provide logistical support and international legitimacy, while regional organizations such as the AU and IGAD offer regional expertise and greater immediate physical presence. This reciprocal relationship highlights the benefit that each organization derives from the partnership, which goes beyond mere resource sharing to encompass strategic and operational synergies.

Social Constructivism

While resource dependence theory helps us understand the 'how' of cooperation, social constructivism offers insights into the 'why.' This theory posits that realities, including those in international relations, are socially constructed through inter-subjective interactions. It emphasises the role of ideational factors, such as norms, identity, and ideas, in shaping the dynamics of international relations.[23]

In the realm of peacekeeping and peacebuilding, social constructivism helps explain the evolution of these concepts as norms of international relations. The notions of peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding are not static; they are shaped and reshaped by interactions and a shared understanding of international actors. This evolution is evident in the way peace missions have adapted over time, reflecting changes in global norms and attitudes towards conflict and intervention.

Collaboration between the UN and regional organizations can be viewed through this constructivist lens as a product of evolving international norms around peace and security. The UN's reliance on regional bodies for peacekeeping reflects a broader shift in the international community's approach towards conflict resolution, recognizing the importance of regional involvement and knowledge. Similarly, the roles and responsibilities of organizations such as the AU and IGAD in peacekeeping and peacebuilding are continuously defined and redefined through their interactions with the UN and other international actors.

By integrating resource dependence theory and social constructivism, a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the UN and regional organizations emerges. While resource dependence theory elucidates the practical aspects of cooperation based on resource needs and benefits, social constructivism offers a deeper understanding of the evolving norms and ideational factors that underpin these cooperative relationships.

This integrated approach is particularly relevant when examining specific cases, such as South Sudan, where the complexities of the conflict necessitate a multifaceted approach to peacekeeping.

The UN's collaboration with the AU and IGAD in South Sudan can be seen as a response to both the practical need for regional resources and expertise, as well as the broader normative shift towards more inclusive and regionally sensitive peacekeeping practices.

1.   The Shift Toward African Ownership in Peace Processes

Boutros Ghali's agenda for peace[24] envisioned a four-way approach to conflicts that permeated the post-Cold War era. Ghali argued for preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding. The notion was that once disputes broke out, peacemaking would be followed by peacekeeping, which was perceived as being put into place to maintain peace between the erstwhile warring parties. Thereafter, peacebuilding took place through programs such as disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR). However, the ebb and flow of post-Cold War conflicts have blurred the lines between war and peace,[25] especially as many conflicts, mainly in Africa, have had a multitude of interlocutors because of the constant fragmentation of armed non-state actors,[26] making it difficult to move in a linear progression from peace-making to peacekeeping to peacebuilding.

The UN moved from a central actor in Africa's peace processes to a more supportive and partnership-based role. Historically, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has played a dominant role in global peacekeeping, including in Africa, overseeing ceasefires, deploying large-scale peace operations, and managing post-conflict transitions.[27] However, as conflicts in Africa became more complex, with the rise of internal armed conflicts and multidimensional peacekeeping challenges, the UN began to re-evaluate its traditional approach.[28] This led to a transition toward "partnership peacekeeping," where the UN collaborates with the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and other regional mechanisms to address security challenges.[29] The principle of subsidiarity has also gained prominence, emphasizing that local and regional organizations should take the lead in managing conflicts where they have better access and understanding.[30] Consequently, while the UN continues to play a crucial role in peacekeeping and peacebuilding, it now operates more as a strategic partner and enabler, providing technical, logistical, and financial support rather than directly leading interventions.

The shift in the UN's role in African peace processes—from a central actor to a supporting partner—aligns closely with the growing emphasis on "African solutions to African problems." This concept reflects the continent's desire to take ownership of the responses/solutions to its challenges rather than rely on external actors, particularly Western-led interventions.[31] The transition toward regional leadership in peace processes has been driven by the belief that African institutions such as the AU and RECs are better positioned to mediate and resolve conflicts due to their local knowledge, cultural proximity, and direct interests in regional stability.

One key reason for this shift is the rejection of externally imposed peacebuilding models, which have often been criticized for applying Western neoliberal frameworks that do not align with African realities.[32] AU, IGAD, and other regional bodies have increasingly taken charge of mediation and conflict resolution efforts, reducing the UN's role in logistical, financial, and technical support rather than direct intervention.[33] This is evident in South Sudan, where the IGAD led peace negotiations, while the UN played a secondary role in implementation and monitoring.

However, although the principle of African ownership is a powerful vision, its implementation faces significant challenges, particularly regarding funding and capacity.[34] Many African-led peace operations still depend heavily on external financing, often from UN or Western donors, raising questions regarding the true extent of self-reliance.[35] This financial dependence sometimes limits the ability of AU- and REC-led missions to act independently, creating tensions between the ideal of African solutions and the reality of external dependence.

Ultimately, the UN's evolving role in Africa is part of a broader reconfiguration of global peace and security governance, where regional actors are taking the lead and international organizations such as the UN are adopting a more supportive and enabling function. While this shift promotes local ownership, it also highlights the need for stronger regional institutions, sustainable funding mechanisms, and more coordinated efforts between the UN and African actors to ensure that peace interventions remain effective and legitimate.

2.   The challenges of the peace processes in South Sudan

The disconnection between peacemaking entities like IGAD and the peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes can indeed create significant challenges within the peace framework of a conflict-ridden country like South Sudan. Peacemaking, which often precedes and facilitates peacekeeping and peacebuilding, is critical, as it directly addresses conflicts at their source and seeks to establish negotiated peace among warring parties. However, several issues arise when these peacemaking processes, such as those facilitated by IGAD, are not sufficiently integrated with peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts.[36]

These interviews underscored this point. IGAD has collaborated with UNMISS since 2013, but its mandates have differed significantly. While the IGAD focuses on negotiations and political settlements, the UNMISS is primarily involved in protection and peacekeeping. The lack of harmonization has weakened their combined efforts, exacerbated by the South Sudanese government's deliberate exclusion of UNMISS from core political processes. The government prefers working with the IGAD due to its regional affiliations and political leverage, often leaving the UN on the periphery.

The South Sudanese government also weakened opposition groups to prevent any one faction from consolidating power, further fragmenting peace efforts.

First, peacekeepers and peacebuilders may find themselves without the necessary tools or mandate to pre-empt or manage emerging conflicts effectively. The absence of seamless integration means that these actors are less informed about the nuances of negotiated agreements and may therefore struggle to recognize early warnings of renewed tensions or conflict triggers. This disconnection could lead to a lack of legitimacy, as peacekeeping and peacebuilding forces may not be perceived as neutral or informed stakeholders capable of intervening effectively to restart peacemaking processes when needed. In this sense, the disconnect between IGAD's peacemaking initiatives and ongoing peacekeeping efforts can undermine the effectiveness of interventions designed to sustain peace, largely because these initiatives do not always communicate changes in the political landscape or shifts in local community sentiments that are critical for maintaining peace.

In addressing the complexities of peacebuilding and peacekeeping in South Sudan, the interaction between the United Nations and regional bodies emerges as a vital component, bridging the gap between the UN's overarching strategies and the complex local realities of the region. This expanded view, drawing from the insights of various scholars, underscores the importance of regional collaboration in enhancing the effectiveness of peace initiatives in South Sudan.

2.1.Fragmented responsibilities

The response to the South Sudan crisis has been marked by fragmented responsibilities and a lack of precise coordination between the UN, AU, IGAD, and other international actors, which has undermined the effectiveness of peace efforts.[37] The AU is formally responsible for peace and security in Africa, as outlined in its Peace and Security Council Protocol. At the same time, the principle of subsidiarity suggests that regional mechanisms, such as IGAD, should take the lead in managing local conflicts.[38] However, despite these frameworks, the division of labor between the AU, RECs, and the UN remains unclear, leading to confusion, inefficiencies, and competition/conflicts over responsibilities.

The insights gleaned from the interviews conducted during the study reinforced a better understanding of this fragmented landscape. According to one expert, IGAD has negotiated three separate agreements since 2013. The first attempt, leading to the formation of a government in 2014, failed due to a lack of monitoring mechanisms. The second agreement collapsed in 2016, when opposition troops entered the capital, escalating violence.

However, IGAD learned from these past failures and kept its special envoy office permanently open, allowing for more continuous oversight in peace negotiations. The establishment of an Independent Commission on Evaluation of the Joint Agreement demonstrates an effort to correct earlier shortcomings, although fragmentation persists within opposition groups and the IGAD itself.

IGAD has played a central role in mediating conflicts within South Sudan and has been a key component of the broader regional peacebuilding architecture.[39] It has facilitated major agreements, including the August 2015 peace deal, which was considered a significant milestone in conflict resolution. The organization's mediation strategy is framed within the African Union's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). It follows the principle of "African solutions to African problems," emphasizing the need for African nations to take the lead in resolving disputes without over-reliance on external actors.[40] This approach is meant to build and strengthen local capacities, fostering sustainable peace through locally rooted norms and mechanisms that are more likely to be respected and upheld by disputing parties.[41]

Despite its central role, IGAD's mediation efforts have been undermined by regional rivalries and internal power struggles. Originally established as an economic development bloc, IGAD was not designed as a peace and security organization, which has weakened its institutional capacity to manage complex negotiations effectively.[42] Moreover, IGAD member states frequently pursue competing interests, backing different factions within South Sudan and shaping mediation outcomes to reflect their own strategic goals rather than prioritizing a neutral resolution.[43] These regional tensions, such as those between Uganda and Ethiopia or Uganda and Sudan, have not only prolonged the peace process, but have also contributed to failures in implementing agreed-upon terms.[44] Peace negotiations led by IGAD have frequently centered on power-sharing arrangements and security sector reforms, drawing on lessons from other conflicts where similar strategies were employed.[45] However, these efforts have often faced implementation challenges due to internal divisions and a lack of sustained political will among South Sudanese leaders.[46]

The involvement of external actors in the peace process has also complicated IGAD's efforts. While IGAD has been the primary mediator, Western stakeholders, especially after 9/11, have played a significant role in influencing the trajectory of peace agreements.[47] At times, this external influence resulted in peace deals driven more by external diplomatic pressures than genuine domestic ownership, raising concerns that certain agreements were not fully aligned with South Sudan's political realities.[48]

The expansion of mediation efforts through the "IGAD-Plus" framework, which included actors such as the AU, UN, EU, China, and Troika (US, UK, Norway), was intended to strengthen diplomatic leverage but instead introduced additional competing agendas, slowing down the peace process rather than accelerating it.[49] The lack of a unified international approach with different actors advocating for different solutions has further fragmented the mediation process.[50]

UNMISS, while supporting peace efforts, has remained constrained mainly by its mandate, resources, and the host government's restrictions. The mission has focused primarily on the Protection of Civilians and local-level conflict resolution, rather than direct mediation, leading some South Sudanese actors to perceive it as peripheral to the political process.[51] By contrast, the UN Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan (OSESS) engaged with a broader range of opposition groups, contributing to a lack of coordination between different UN entities involved in the peace process.[52]

Despite the AU's goal of leading peace and security efforts on the continent, tensions between the UN and the AU persist, particularly regarding the distribution of power, resources, and political influence in peace interventions.[53] The AU asserts that it should be the primary driver of Africa's peace and security agenda. Still, bilateral interventions by individual states, competing diplomatic frameworks, and parallel multilateral initiatives frequently undermine its authority.[54] Additionally, peacekeeping operations have suffered from duplication of efforts between the UN and the AU, and gaps in legal and technical expertise, further weakening the effectiveness of joint interventions.[55]

In response to these challenges, Mangara notes that there have been calls for institutional reforms within the IGAD to enhance its role in managing complex peace negotiations. Some scholars argue that transforming IGAD's political program into a more structured and predictable peace mediation bureau—one that can engage with heads of state in coordination with the APSA's Panel of the Wise—could help increase the effectiveness of IGAD-led peace efforts.[56] However, without addressing the broader issues of regional rivalries, external interference, and limited institutional capacity, peace efforts in South Sudan remain fragmented.

The South Sudan crisis highlights the consequences of fragmented responsibilities and a lack of coordination among the UN, AU, IGAD, and other international actors, which have weakened mediation and peace implementation efforts. While the principle of "African solutions to African problems" remains a guiding principle, its effectiveness is often compromised when internal divisions, external influences, and logistical constraints undermine regional organizations.

2.1.Examining the Interplay Between the United Nations and Regional Entities in Peacekeeping and Peacemaking

Peacemaking in South Sudan entails active diplomatic efforts to forge peace agreements between the conflicting parties. Here, IGAD has been notably influential because of its regional proximity and understanding of local dynamics. IGAD's peacemaking efforts have included mediation, negotiations, and facilitating dialogue among factions, exemplified by its role in brokering the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This proactive approach aims to address and resolve the underlying causes of conflict through dialogue and negotiation, moving from conflict management to resolution.

A UN official interviewed on the UN-IGAD collaboration noted that IGAD's role has been prominent in Sudan-South Sudan issues since the 1990s, and it has remained a key mediator. The UN accepted IGAD's primacy under Chapter VIII of the Charter, acknowledging the region's leadership in conflict resolution. The official emphasized that IGAD's deep knowledge of the region provides it with a comparative advantage, allowing it to maneuver where the UN, often bound by bureaucratic constraints, struggles to act effectively. This aligns with the argument that regional organizations can navigate conflicts with more flexibility than the UN, but they also cause internal political complications.

In South Sudan's complex conflict landscape, peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding are essential. These efforts are primarily coordinated by international and regional entities, such as the UN and IGAD, which play critical yet distinct roles in stabilizing the region, resolving conflicts, and establishing a sustainable peace framework.

The UN primarily leads peacekeeping in South Sudan through the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Established shortly after the country's independence in 2011 and later reprioritized in response to the civil conflict that erupted in 2013, UNMISS plays a crucial role in monitoring and reporting human rights abuses, providing humanitarian assistance, and protecting civilians. The operational strategy of peacekeeping often involves a significant physical presence, including military and police contingents, to stabilize conflict zones. This presence is vital in South Sudan's volatile and unpredictable conflict environment.[57]

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Ancas[58] studied the expansion of RECs from economic objectives to encompassing their roles in peace and security, marking a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape of Africa. Originally established with economic integration and development in mind, RECs such as ECOWAS have increasingly recognized that achieving their broader economic and social goals is inextricably linked to the establishment and maintenance of peace within the region. However, this transition was not without its challenges. The literature points to tensions and inconsistencies among the UN, AU, and RECs, which have manifested in various conflict-resolution efforts across the region. The experiences of Madagascar, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) serve as illustrative cases in which these tensions impede effective conflict management and resolution.[59]

The outbreak of the conflict in South Sudan witnessed substantial participation of the IGAD, an entity comprising eight member states: Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia. This critical decision, highlighted by Müller and Bergmann[60] emphasized African-led intervention in a regional crisis. Nonetheless, despite these endeavors, which encompassed the establishment of the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC) and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism (CTSAMM), challenges persisted, as evidenced by recurrent ceasefire violations. In June 2017, the IGAD initiated the High-Level Revitalisation Forum for South Sudan (HLRF) to broaden the inclusiveness of the peace process. The forum aimed to involve not only the parties to the ARCSS, but also other armed and non-armed groups previously excluded. The subsequent negotiations culminated in the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018, a comprehensive agreement that incorporated key aspects of the 2015 ARCSS and the 2017 Cessation of Hostilities (ACOH) agreement.[61]

However, the endorsement of IGAD as the primary mediator tied the peace process to the region's complex power politics. Müller and Bergmann[62] noted that this decision intricately connects the peace process to regional dynamics. IGAD's involvement expanded through the IGAD-Plus formula proposed in March 2015, which included key regional and international stakeholders to apply collective pressure on conflicting parties and offer incentives for a comprehensive peace agreement.[63] Despite these efforts, IGAD has faced challenges owing to a lack of support from parts of the international community and divergent interests among global powers, leading to issues such as the ineffectiveness of arms embargoes.[64]

Key takeaways from this situation include the realization that while regional actors such as IGAD took charge of mediation and peacekeeping efforts, their effectiveness was hindered by various factors. These include a lack of legitimacy, internal politics affecting neutrality, the absence of inclusivity in the peace process, and a lack of strong enforcement mechanisms. Akol[65] and Bereketeab[66] highlight challenges such as IGAD's lack of impartiality, trust issues in its role as a mediator, and the struggle to create conditions conducive to a sustainable resolution. Furthermore, the nature of IGAD's ad hoc development and the lack of political will to establish it as a fully-fledged organization present significant challenges.[67]

That said, the work of Ylönen[68] provides critical insights into the complexities of state building in post-conflict environments. Ylönen's analysis delineates the challenges encountered during the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Southern Sudan from 2005 to 2011. This pivotal period in the region's history saw the end of Africa's longest-running war and led to the secession of Southern Sudan in July 2011.

The CPA, a two-party power-sharing treaty between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), was conceptualized as a roadmap for peace. However, Ylönen highlights that the implementation phase was fraught with difficulties due to the complex interplay of local political actors in Southern Sudan. His critique is particularly relevant to the study of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and its role in peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Ylönen's distinction between state- and nation-building is a key aspect that resonates with the current research's focus on the peripheral role of the UN in peacemaking. He argues that the external intervention's primary focus on state-building, under the "peace-through-state-building" approach, failed to address the crucial aspect of nation-building. Ylönen posited that this oversight significantly impacted the effectiveness of the intervention in establishing lasting peace.

This perspective aligns with the concerns raised regarding the efficacy of UNMISS in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes, especially in terms of its credibility and technical challenges. Ylönen's analysis underscores the importance of considering the interconnectedness of state-building, nation-building, and peacemaking in post-conflict scenarios. His insights are instrumental in understanding the limitations and challenges faced by organizations such as UNMISS, especially in a context where they are not the primary negotiators of peace agreements but rather implementers of deals negotiated by others.

The linear/sequential approach, which segments peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding into distinct phases, provides a structured framework for addressing conflicts. However, the inherent complexities and evolving nature of conflicts in South Sudan demand a more adaptive and nuanced strategy.

Systemic and integrative approaches to peace processes are particularly relevant in contexts such as South Sudan, where the unpredictability of social change and intricacies of conflict dynamics can render linear strategies ineffective on their own. As articulated by Mayanja[69] systemic thinking suggests that incorporating perspectives from chaos and systems theories can provide a framework that is inherently more adaptable to the unpredictable and complex nature of societal transitions. This approach supports a peacebuilding strategy that is not only structured but also dynamically responsive, allowing stakeholders to adjust their interventions as new challenges and opportunities arise.

The efficacy of systemic thinking is enhanced through its integration with local and inclusive peacebuilding practices. As highlighted by Liaga and Wielenga[70], the involvement of regional actors in peace processes ensures that initiatives are grounded in the actual needs and context of the communities they aim to serve. This local involvement is crucial for the legitimacy and sustainability of peace efforts, as it fosters ownership and aligns peace interventions with the sociocultural dynamics of the population.

Hilhorst and Van Leeuwen[71] emphasize the need for a qualitative, process-oriented approach to peacebuilding that focuses on understanding and strengthening local peace organizations. This approach addresses the gap often found between policy-driven peace initiatives and the everyday realities of individuals engaged in, or affected by, these efforts. By prioritizing the processes through which peace organizations operate within communities, peacebuilding becomes a more organic and embedded part of the societal fabric, leading to more enduring and effective outcomes.

In practice, integrating systemic and integrative approaches with local participation means creating platforms for dialogue that include a broad spectrum of stakeholders, from local community leaders and civil society organizations to national government representatives and international donors. This involves continuously adapting peacebuilding strategies to reflect evolving political, social, and economic landscapes, ensuring that interventions remain relevant and practical over time.

This combined approach not only addresses the linear sequences of peacemaking and peacekeeping but also embeds these efforts within the nonlinear, multifaceted reality of South Sudan's transformation. Such a holistic strategy is essential for navigating the complexities of conflict and peacebuilding in a manner that is sustainable, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of all those involved.

Moreover, the application of a process approach to local peace organizations, as advocated by Hilhorst[72] enhances the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts by aligning them more closely with the lived experiences and needs of the local population.

3.   Addressing the shortcomings of UN peace processes in South Sudan

An analysis of the UN's role in South Sudan challenges the assumption that its peripheral role in peacemaking is the primary determinant of its effectiveness in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Instead, the findings suggest that a combination of structural, political, and operational factors shapes the success and limitations of UNMISS rather than its exclusion from mediation.

The findings of the study confirm that UNMISS has been deliberately constrained by the South Sudanese government, despite playing a critical role in supporting IGAD initiatives. A UN official noted that the South Sudanese government was reluctant to allow UNMISS to be significantly involved in its internal affairs. In contrast, IGAD enjoyed greater flexibility due to its regional ties. While the UN is included in monitoring mechanisms such as the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM) and the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC), it lacks political influence. This reinforces the argument that UNMISS is institutionally restricted rather than ineffective due to its peacemaking exclusion.

The historical evolution of UN peace operations, as outlined by Sens,[73] illustrates the organization's shift toward addressing intrastate conflicts and incorporating peacebuilding into its mandates. However, while this expansion of responsibilities has allowed the UN to engage in post-conflict reconstruction efforts, South Sudan has demonstrated the difficulties of implementing these broader peace missions in fragmented and highly politicized environments. Sens's argument underscores the need to reassess traditional peacekeeping models in cases in which state institutions remain fragile and conflict remains cyclical rather than resolved.

The UNMISS mandate in South Sudan, heavily focused on the Protection of Civilians (PoC), reflects a mission constrained by immediate security needs rather than an integrative, long-term peacebuilding strategy. Liaga and Wielenga[74] argued that inclusive peace processes and local ownership are critical to the long-term success of peacebuilding efforts. Their research suggests that a failure to engage local actors, communities, and civil society organizations limits the legitimacy and sustainability of interventions. In South Sudan, the UN's engagement has often been perceived as externally imposed, reinforcing narratives of foreign intervention rather than national reconciliation.

Building on the importance of local engagement (Breidlid[75]), explored how UNMISS partnerships with religious institutions could enhance its legitimacy and effectiveness. South Sudan's deeply rooted communal structures, including churches, have historically played a crucial role in mediating conflict and community reconciliation. The limited integration of such local institutions into the UN's broader peacebuilding framework demonstrates a missed opportunity to foster a locally embedded approach. Donais[76] further supports this position by arguing that sustained investments in localized peacebuilding efforts are necessary for long-term stability. His findings highlight that merely focusing on security measures such as PoC sites and disarmament programs does not address the underlying political and social drivers of conflict. Instead, peacebuilding should involve meaningful engagement with communities to rebuild trust, strengthen governance structures, and foster reconciliation. In South Sudan, this requires a shift in UNMISS priorities from reactive crisis management toward proactive, community-driven peace efforts.

While local engagement is necessary, regional dynamics further complicate the UN's role in South Sudan. The IGAD's involvement in the peace process was intended to promote African-led solutions, aligning with the African Union's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA).[77] However, as Heal[78] and Ylönen[79] highlight regional rivalries and conflicting state interests within the IGAD have undermined its ability to serve as a neutral mediator. The peace negotiations, while facilitated under IGAD's leadership, have often reflected the geopolitical agendas of its member states, making the process highly politicized and fragmented. This regional complexity has further shaped the limitations of the UNMISS, as its ability to implement peacebuilding strategies depends on the stability and coordination of regional actors. The influence of external stakeholders, particularly Western governments and international donors, has further diluted the ability of regional institutions to take full ownership of the peace process.[80] These external pressures often prioritize immediate stability over long-term, locally owned peace efforts, further entrenching the cycle of crisis intervention rather than sustainable state building.

The interplay between global, regional, and local actors underscores why the effectiveness of the UN's intervention in South Sudan cannot be reduced to its marginal role in peacemaking. While the principle of subsidiarity suggests that regional bodies should take the lead in conflict resolution, their institutional weaknesses, internal divisions, and geopolitical interests have often hindered, rather than strengthened, the peace process.[81] Tschirgi[82] offers an essential perspective on how peacebuilding can evolve into a holistic, regionally integrated process. She argued that effective peacebuilding requires a balance between international policy frameworks and context-specific inductive strategies tailored to individual conflicts. In the case of South Sudan, this would strengthen the role of regional organizations while ensuring that competing political interests do not undermine them.

Additionally, Tschirgi's advocacy for a regional conflict formation (RCF) model reinforces the idea that peacebuilding cannot be addressed solely within national borders—regional instability, cross-border dynamics, and economic factors must be integrated into peace strategies.

Ultimately, the study's findings confirm that it is not the UN's peripheral role in peacemaking that determines its effectiveness in South Sudan but rather the interaction between multiple factors and fragmented responsibilities, regional political rivalries, external influences, and local implementation challenges. The assumption that greater UN involvement in negotiations would have ensured better peacebuilding outcomes oversimplifies South Sudan's reality. Instead, the effectiveness of UNMISS and broader peace efforts depends on how well international, regional, and local actors coordinate, align their strategies, and address the root causes of instability. Moving forward, the challenge for the UN and its partners is to transition from crisis management to long-term stabilization, ensuring that peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts are not merely reactive interventions but part of a cohesive, sustainable strategy for conflict resolution.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of UNMISS in South Sudan cannot be solely attributed to its limited role in peacemaking. However, it must be understood within the broader landscape of institutional fragmentation, competing regional interests, and the persistent instability of South Sudan's political environment. While the UN has historically led peacekeeping efforts in Africa, its shift toward a more supportive role in coordination with regional actors, such as IGAD and the AU, reflects a broader transformation in international peace operations.[83] This study has demonstrated that while UNMISS has played a critical role in protecting civilians, supporting humanitarian efforts, and facilitating local peace initiatives, its operational constraints, resource limitations, and political marginalization have hindered its ability to achieve long-term peace in South Sudan.[84]

The study also highlights that the disconnect between peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding remains a significant structural challenge in South Sudan's conflict resolution process. Despite leading mediation efforts, IGAD has struggled with internal divisions and competing state interests.[85] Meanwhile, the UN's reliance on regional actors for political negotiations has often left it in a reactive position, with peacekeeping operations constrained by shifting mandates and host government restrictions.[86] The principle of "African solutions to African problems" has guided AU and IGAD interventions.

However, their effectiveness continues to be shaped by financial dependence on external actors, institutional capacity gaps, and geopolitical influences.[87]

Ultimately, the findings of this study challenge the notion that a more central role of the UN in peacemaking would inherently lead to better peacekeeping and peacebuilding outcomes. Instead, it argues that the success of international peace efforts in South Sudan depends on a more integrated, well-coordinated approach that aligns with local, regional, and international strategies. Strengthening institutional cooperation, ensuring long-term political commitment, and addressing the underlying sociopolitical and economic drivers of conflict will be crucial in overcoming the systemic obstacles that have hindered sustainable peace. Moving forward, the UN, AU, and IGAD must shift from fragmented crisis-driven interventions to a more cohesive long-term peacebuilding strategy that fosters national ownership while leveraging international support in a more just, adaptive and context-sensitive manner.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norman Sempijja is an Associate Professor at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University in the Faculty of Governance Economics and Social Sciences in Morocco.

He holds a PhD in international politics (2013) from Kingston University UK. He also has an MA in Diplomatic Studies from Keele University UK and BA Social Sciences from Makerere University Uganda. He has taught a number of courses in international relations and political science in Morocco, France, United Kingdom, South Africa and Spain.

His research focuses on international security especially the security-development and governance nexus. Further interests are on state fragmentation and coups in Africa. He also has research interests in inter-organisational cooperation in peacekeeping and peacebuilding with specific focus on European Union, United Nations and African Union.

His teaching and supervision revolve around international relations and political science courses.